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They Are Less Than Freedom Fighters

Bawling out the Sandinistas hasn't worked for the Reagan administration. Rubbing them out is now its goal. The erasers of the five-year-old Nicaraguan government, which Ronald Reagan demagogically calls "totalitarian . . . brutal, cruel," are to be the 15,000 *contras*. These are a mix of soldiers of fortune, rebels and political fanatics financed by the CIA, the experts at mining harbors and writing terrorist manuals.

Reagan abuses language by habitually calling the *contras* "freedom fighters." The methods of their combat—killing more than 800 civilians in the past four years, including some 130 children; destroying health clinics and schools; kidnapping nurses and doctors—have been so repulsive that three times Congress voted against further aid. The *contras* were seen as slaughterers, not fighters. Occasionally some limits are reached in sanctioned gore.

But not, it appears, for Reagan. Short of having them take a bow from the balcony at a State of the Union speech, the president has done everything else to beautify the *contras*. They are "our brothers," he said in his Feb. 16 radio speech. He compared them with such historical "freedom fighters" as Lafayette, von Steuben, Kosciuszko and Simon Bolivar. Only the memory of John Wayne was left uninvoked. Presumably the Duke will have his day when the *contras* enter downtown Managua for a final shootout with the black-hat Sandinistas.

A year ago, the *contras* were sanctified because they were said to be blocking the flow of guns into El Salvador. Now, says George Shultz, there is a better reason: the Nicaraguan government is "bad news. . . . We'd like them to see the error of their ways." Reagan wants them to say "Uncle." The proposed \$14 million handout from Congress to the *contras* would

help ensure that more health clinics are bombed, more civilians killed and children mutilated. These lessons in truth, beauty and democracy are meant to show President Daniel Ortega all his errors as he has never before seen them.

With brothers and uncles on the scene, there is now a Reagan kissing-cousin also calling for the destruction of the Sandinistas. George F. Will, on "ABC World News" Feb. 19, said an overthrow is needed and "we should try to do it openly." "The Soviet-style regime" is beyond hope of reform, he said.

This call on national television for the violent overthrow of a government that Will doesn't like because, among other crimes, it allegedly "brags" about its "Soviet style," was too much for the placid Peter Jennings. He interrupted to ask, "George, covert or overt, aren't you somewhat ignoring international law?" Will replied: "Well, Peter, I wish we could run international affairs the way the Warren Court wanted to run the judicial affairs in this country. It's an untidy world out there. I think this country ought to remember that if we hadn't had aid from France and Spain and elsewhere for George Washington's *contras*, we wouldn't have had this country."

This must have been an unprecedented moment in television journalism. A major news organization was providing air time to an employee to advocate the violent overthrow of a nation we aren't at war with. It let him ridicule the uselessness of law because the world is "untidy." He smeared an elected government (what does "Soviet style" mean?) and, in phony scholarship, he rewrote history (George Washington's troops were not the *contras* in the American Revolution, the Hessians were.)

When asked about this, Peter Jennings, an experienced journalist, confessed, "I was not too pleased." That's about all the public anger Jennings was willing to display, except to add that he was not satisfied with Will's evading of his question. Jennings asked about international law, not the Warren Court or world untidiness.

Jennings said that Will was on the show for commentary. It isn't doubted. There is no argument against that. But a call for lawlessness and violence is no more commentary than Reagan's glamorizing the *contras* as freedom fighters is a leveling with the public.

That is the raw misuse of power at the core of Reagan's assaults on the Nicaraguan government. He and chums like Will have towering plat-

forms of authority from which to flaunt a narrow political view, while those on the fringes with balanced and compassionate perspective are nearly voiceless.

One of the latter is Dr. Paula Braveman, an assistant clinical professor in the School of Medicine of the University of California. As a frequent visitor to Nicaragua and as a founder of the Committee for Health Rights in Central America, she reports that "30 health centers have been destroyed or closed because of *contra* attacks." She knows of "18 workers, including two European doctors, [who] have been killed, 13 wounded and 18 health workers kidnapped, tortured or raped." This was before a late January raid in eastern Nicaragua in which three civilians were killed and four medical workers abducted.

Braveman said that it makes her wonder what kind of a human being, let alone president, Reagan is "when he chooses rapists, terrorists and assassins as his brothers."